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ABSTRACT

The impact of declining enrollment on the public schools and its implications for educational planning are examined. Three critical areas in instructional improvement are considered. As enrollments decline, more space becomes available in school facilities. Uses for this space are suggested: development of resource centers, expansion of enrichment and practical arts programs, more effective use of areas for handicapped students, and centers for staff inservice training programs. Smaller school populations also offer possibilities for more effective small group instruction. Curriculum adjustment to declining enrollment includes the expansion of individual instruction and the broadening of exploratory programs and increasing career awareness. The third area in which school improvement may be a direct outcome of declining enrollment is the more innovative use of staff talents and time. New groupings for instruction, the inclusion of teaming as an instructional practice, and differentiating staff responsibilities are discussed as possible means for improving instruction. (JD)

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# DECLINING ENROLLMENTS: ALL IS NOT LOST

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# DECLINING ENROLLMENTS: ALL IS NOT LOST

## Introduction

The past decade has reflected a steady decline in enrollments in our public schools. The implication of this pattern should have considerable impact on the curriculum of our schools and upon those who assume leadership roles in guiding public education.

Administrators will have to acquire new management skills in utilizing the available physical facilities and resources. Many school districts have already planned different approaches in meeting this goal as enrollments have been declining during the 1970's. The end result of quality education will come about only through a positive approach to the challenges ahead. This article is directed toward looking at three critical areas for instructional improvement: improved facility utilization, curriculum adjustment to meet changing societal demands and demographic variations, and improved utilization of the human resources who will inevitably be impacted by decreases in student population.

## Facilities Utilization

Many schools, particularly those housing elementary children, do not contain curriculum resource centers and often do not contain a central library. With space available, school districts can now plan for the central housing of materials for classroom use. As enrollments continue to decline the materials should go further and provide more equal opportunities for students to use the materials. The resource centers

can also be utilized for staff in-service and training programs, thus providing greater opportunity for teachers to experience professional growth.

Federal and state legislation directed towards school districts to more effectively meet the needs of students with handicaps is another example of an opportunity to take advantage of increased space in buildings. Classrooms which formerly were housed separately from the school building for special education can now be located in the building. This provides students with disabilities a greater opportunity to be mainstreamed into the regular school programs.

Many of the Fine Arts programs now are finding rooms which provide the various classes and teachers with self-contained space. This will allow for students to have enriched programs in such areas as Art, Music, and Physical Education/Health. Teachers will have materials available for students which will not have to be transported from classroom to classroom.

Title IX legislation and increased awareness of non-sexist curriculum opportunities have been partially responsible for including both boys and girls in the Practical Arts areas of Industrial Arts, Home Economics, and Physical Education. Declining student numbers coupled with increasing space availability have allowed students to enter these practical arts areas which were extremely limited to students during student growth periods.

In the past, effective use of facilities dictated classes of twenty-five plus students thereby requiring group instruction in most cases. Particularly at the secondary level, the curriculum was structured in a

manner which assummed students had functional use of reading, mathematics, and writing skills and thereby little consideration was given to maintaining developmental programs in these areas. An opportunity now exists to provide improved programs for continuous progress in basic skills. Reduced enrollments should facilitate a higher level of individualized instructional and opportunities to construct small group and clinical areas. This can do much to insure that all students graduating from high school are functionally literate in basic skills.

Curricular Adjustment

The opportunities for our schools to assist each student in developing positive attitudes, positive values, and an improved self concept may be facilitated by declining enrollments. Formerly, it was assumed students would naturally develop a value system which would enable them to function as responsible adults contributing to the needs of society. This was considered to be a natural consequence of positive family relationships and maturation. There appears to be greater and greater evidence that for many students this is not adequate. Positive value systems and trust relationships with adults are not being formed. With declining enrollments administrators may be able to direct a greater thrust of teacher initiative and responsibility into these affective areas. The small group and clinical areas mentioned in the previous paragraph would also facilitate group and individual guidance and counseling. Perhaps we can begin to offer a program which accepts an individual with the maturity of a child as a child, and the maturity of an adult as an adult while assisting all students in a program which leads to greater academic and social maturity.

Educational programs for students of the "Middle Years" has been enhanced by facility and resource utilization which will allow expanded curriculum exploratory programs for students in the 10-14 year age category. The combination of reduced student enrollment and changing distributions of persons in various age categories provides tremendous curricular potential, particularly in providing a broad exploratory program and increased career awareness.

Historically our society has had a pyramidal structure with a large number of public school students as compared to the number of senior citizens. Suddenly the pyramid is becoming much more cylindrical with a greater percentage of senior citizens and a lesser percentage of school age children. Educators can draw heavily upon the human resources which exist in the community with highly competent and successful adults communicating to students various career areas and suggestions for academic, social and professional development which will facilitate their opportunities for advancement in chosen occupations. The small group and clinical areas would again lead to the personal touch which is so important in developing a basic feeling of selfworth and individual importance.

Alternative school programs are finding more lasting "homes" as portions of buildings become available for their use due to declining enrollment. Several districts have been able to utilize complete buildings for various alternative programs. A feeling of "permanency" is often very important to the success of these programs designed to fit the needs of students who do not choose to follow the school's regular programs.

Human Resources

However, adjustments must not be made only in facilities and curriculum. Perhaps the area of greatest impact, and also possibly of greatest importance, is that of maintaining and improving the human resources whom are in daily contact with the products of our system, the students.

The spectre and reality of declining enrollments should prompt administrators to plan ahead in terms of the new role requirements that may be inevitable. Shifts will occur in the districts instructional needs. When demographic data have revealed when and where certain patterns of enrollment decline, the need for futuristic planning is at hand. The administration must be prepared to present a functional plan to the Board of Education which will cause the least disruption while helping to insure no loss in the quality of education being offered in the district. Obviously, this is no easy task in periods of general financial restraint or during periods of increased pressure on schools to eliminate the "frills" and get "back to the basics." In addition to convincing governing boards, the administrator must also be prepared to put forth a strong case for staffing changes to the bargaining unit. If the unit can be convinced that jobs are being protected rather than jeopardized, cooperation might be more easily attained. The skill with which the administrator plans and subsequently sells the plan is of utmost importance if the inevitable changes are to occur. The following paragraphs denote some ways to face the problem and utilize these changes to improve the quality of the curriculum offered to our students.

One of the most obvious challenges brought on by declining enrollments is the proper reaction to reduced class size. If the teachers in the

classrooms where fewer and fewer children are present continue to teach in the same manner as when classes were full or overcrowded, then all is lost, because children will be receiving essentially the same human contact they experienced in the past. The ability to truly individualize certain aspects of our programs is never going to be more possible than it is during the decline period. In order to do this, teachers are going to need help in learning to employ new instructional strategies, gaining an awareness of new curricular programs, and constructing individualized educational programs so that hopefully, at some point in time, each child will be provided with an educational program geared to his/her own capacities and needs.

With fewer students in each class various support personnel should be able to branch out and serve a broader range of students abilities, thereby providing assistance to teachers in dealing with many of the marginal problems which classroom teachers had to cope with although they had no formal training in dealing with the specific exceptionalities which were present. The administrator who is planning ahead should be thinking about helping teachers orientate themselves to these new roles. Provision should be made for proper in-service activities which will precede the enrollment decline in order to insure that the change emerges as a continual process rather than as a sudden alteration involving conflict between the bargaining unit and management team.

Helping regular classroom teachers to be receptive to consultative assistance from peers will present a formidible challenge. There are no magic solutions to these problems - each administrator must find ways to overcome local obstacles. Depending on staff strengths and abilities, the opportunity for increased use of specialists may emerge in a period

of declining enrollment. An innovational proposal to use existing staff as specialists would be to have a "floating" teacher throughout the year, say at six week intervals, and rotate the staff through the floating teacher position. In that way each member will be able to serve as a valuable resource to all students and peers. Here again, the administrator would have to know the staff well and be able to provide the organizational and scheduling support that would be needed. In-service needed? Absolutely! The teacher providing the services would be learning a new role and the receiving classroom teachers would need to plan cooperatively in order to most effectively use this "new" resource.

Sharp decline in enrollment can cause severe imbalances in certain parts of the curriculum and require pooling of resources or retooling of teachers into entirely new instructional areas. For example, the number of students enrolled in advanced foreign language or mathematics classes may dwindle considerably as enrollment declines. It may become harder and harder to justify a full-time teacher of these subjects. Since schools cannot always find the correct combination of program needs in any one individual, the next best arrangement might be to share teachers. Sometimes this can be done internally in a larger district, but may often occur between districts. Logistics are not always easy but they can be worked out with careful planning. A variation of the "shared teacher" concept is the utilization of technology. We now have the electronic capability to transmit audio and in some cases video messages across great distances. With proper planning, it is conceivable that a foreign language teacher can serve three or more schools, taking turns in eminating broadcasts from the various school sites. The use of advanced media in any school could possibly supplement the periodic visits of the "real"

teacher. Feedback capabilities of those new electronic wonders also help to bring immediacy to questions students at sites when the teacher is not present.

The deployment of extended educational leaves may become necessary to allow teachers who have given extended creditable service to the district a chance to retool and become a valuable asset to the instructional program. Although such retooling is common in industry, school systems have lagged far behind in this area.

## Conclusion

The foregoing provide some notion of the overall task facing a school district during periods of enrollment declines. With knowledge of staff potential and some abilities to provide adequate leadership in the staff development area, daring new or untried staffing arrangements can be attempted. This is not possible, however, without a thorough understanding of where student and staff shifts are going to occur. There is nothing callous about anticipating retirements or resignations when a little advanced planning could help strengthen obvious weaknesses in current staffing.

The challenge of new groupings for instruction, the inclusion of teaming as an instructional practice and the implementation of the as-yet-untried concept of staff differentiation are all areas which demand futuristic planning by the administrator. Such issues as early retirement, sabbatical leaves, split assignments, and floating substitutes are a few ideas which have been tried with varying success in some districts. The need for study and planning in these areas fall most heavily on the

administrative team. Not only must administrators be expert at demographics and finances, but they must also understand the latest in staffing arrangements and curricular improvements.

In addition, school officials must be wary of making changes which violate certain accepted indicators of quality. For example, following guidelines of the various accrediting associations would be one barometer of quality that can provide some assurance of program standards. The administrator's task, then, is to carefully study the district's needs, the staff's strengths and the future program to see if any of the foregoing suggestions can be implemented in a manner which will improve the educational climate for students.